

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

from the Pacific Garden Mission, Chicago, Illinois

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Chapter Nineteen

Arnold Vander Meulen - Prayer on Paper

FROM THE START, his mother and I tried to teach Arnold the difference between right and wrong. But in 1939, when he was fourteen, he'd been in criminal court twice, and we knew we had failed.

One night he staggered in the front door of our Grand Rapids home and knocked over things. For the third time that week, he was drunk.

"Oh Arnold, here, let me help you up to bed, Baby," I heard his mother say. Not a word about the things.

"Cut out that 'baby' stuff, Mom," the boy snarled. "Leave me alone."

"Your bed's turned down. Can I help you up, Arnold?"

"Naw, just leave me alone." He stumbled toward the stairs.

His mother and I listened as Arnold labored along the hall into his own room. When we heard the bed springs twang as he fell across the bed, we started upstairs too, to our room.

Later that night, we knelt and pleaded for help. "Lord, we don't know where we've failed the boy. We've done the best we know how. Please help him," we said. "If we have failed him, forgive us. But above all, take him all the way into Your hands and somehow change him into the sweet, kind boy he used to be."

But while we were praying, Arnold tiptoed past our partly opened door, down the stairs and out the front door.

He must have heard our voices as we prayed, for out in the yard he shouted, "I don't need Your help, GOD, or anybody else's. I don't want any part of You as long as I live. So get this once and for all, I don't care if You are GOD. You leave me alone." Then he went down the walk and slammed the gate behind him. Arnold had left home.

He kept in touch with us for the next two years. A postcard from New York, a scribbled note on some dirty white paper from Tulsa. He didn't say much, but his mother and I got the picture - fighting fists, crooked dice, gambling, heavy drinking. He found out about dope those two years, too.

His mother and I and his sister Ruth talked about Arnold a lot those years. Once in a while I wondered if I should let the authorities know about him, but I realized I didn't have to do so. In two years, Arnold had landed in jails in almost every state in the country.

But we kept hoping - and praying. One summer night, his mother and I were on the glider on the front porch for a breath of air. We were reminiscing about the boy, and his mother began to cry a little. I slipped my arm around her and right there we knelt in the darkness.

While we were kneeling and praying quietly, we heard someone come up the walk and then Arnold's voice.

"Hey, Mom, Dad. Is that any way to greet the prodigal son? Come on, up on your feet. According to the Bible, you're supposed to kill a fatted calf, at least a chicken. You ought to know that."

He sounded older and tougher. But no matter, Arnold was home. We were thankful, and he was sober, too.

For the next few days, his mother cooked only his favorite meals, and I made a lot of talk about having some of his neighborhood pals over. Most of the time he hung around the house in a pair of old slacks. He was thinner and he looked tired, but we were almost sure he was ready to make a new start.

He'd been home about two weeks when I got a call from the county jail. I didn't know how to tell his mother. I didn't have to.

"I know that look on your face," she said. "Something's happened to Arnold."

"You're right," I said. "He's in jail again. Some photographic equipment was stolen from a car in town. The car belonged to the district attorney. It was Arnold that took the stuff."

His trial came up the next Wednesday. I didn't hope for any leniency, but the judge's sternness shocked me. "I'm sick and tired of looking at your sneering face, Arnold Vander Meulen. You're beyond the help of this court. I've never sent a sixteen-year-old boy to the state penitentiary before. No other judge in Michigan has, either. But I am sending you. One to five years in Michigan state prison, Arnold Vander Meulen."

The term might have been longer - his mother and I tried to console each other. Maybe with good behavior it would be less, we told ourselves. But Arnold didn't know the meaning of good behavior, in jail or out. After three years, they released him. We knew the date he was getting out and we sat in our living room and waited.

"He'll come home, of course," we assured ourselves.

But Arnold didn't come home. Instead he began another shiftless tour of the country, drinking, gambling, living on dope.

Every six months or so, his aimless circuit brought him into Grand Rapids. He'd stay with us a week or more, drinking steadily; then push on. It was one of those times that his draft notice came. He was taking pheno-barbital then, day and night, and he woke up one morning groggy with the dope and drink, to find the letter in his mother's hand.

"They want me to fight for my country. That's a laugh," Arnold told us. But he didn't have the nerve to dodge the government orders.

"We've got to keep on praying," I told his mother over and over. "Who knows, maybe the army discipline will help him."

This seemed to make sense to both of us. It was a new hope. Maybe in the war, Arnold would meet a chaplain, might start to pray because he was lonesome or afraid. He might turn to GOD for help.

We should have had less confidence in our boy than that, perhaps. He met gambling partners instead of chaplains. Liquor was easier than ever to get. Shipped overseas to the Philippines, Arnold found out about earning easy money with the black market.

The scrapes he got himself into were so filthy and involved that he had to desert. In order to get back to this country, he had to re-enlist under another name, of course. Back in the States, he deserted again. And it wasn't long before the army caught up with him on another of his junkets around the country. He was arrested for double desertion.

They took him back to the West coast for court-martial, rather, they started out with him. When the train stopped for water on a mountain between Nevada and California, Arnold slugged his guard with his handcuffs, took his keys, got rid of the handcuffs and escaped.

From then on, he was a fugitive.

He went into every state but one, and almost twice as many jails. When he was close enough, I'd try to take time off from work to visit him in jail. Sometimes I prayed with him. Sometimes I just slipped him a piece of paper with a Scripture verse on it. He was still scoffing. "Religion-nuts."

Out of jail, on a good day, he'd call us. What he said and how was always the same. Tough and loud and cocksure. What his mother and I said to him never changed, either. "GOD can save you from the uttermost to the uttermost, Arnold, Son." But he always gave us back, "Aw, cut it out. You're both goofy."

In November, 1947, he wandered into Grand Rapids without even calling us first. He just strolled into the house one day, tossed his mussed coat on the dining room table and settled down in the easy chair in the front room. "Thought I'd like a little time with the old folks at home." he told us.

His mother and I didn't ask much about where he'd been or where he was supposed to be. We didn't mention his army desertion at all. But he seemed so docile, we began to hope again. I asked him to go to church with me.

"You're kiddin'," he said and picked up the paper. "No, I'm not, Arnold. Even if you sit there and laugh out loud in the middle of the service, I want you to come."

He pulled himself to his feet. "Oh, well, it might be good for a laugh at that. Wait till I get myself a tie."

I don't know whether Arnold got his laughs out of that meeting. I'm sure he didn't get much else.

From that night on, he drank harder than ever. To pay for his liquor he needed cash. Months later, I found out he got it by writing bad checks. At home, he yelled at his mother and cursed me.

The situation snapped after he'd been home about a month. His mother and I were in town. Arnold and Ruth were at home. Arnold was drunk.

Ruthie told us later that he sat clutching his bottle and watching her stack the dishes.

"Do you have to put your cigarette out in the good dinner plates?" she asked him.

"Shut up," he told her.

"Looks like you could reach just six more inches and hit the ash tray."

"Shut up, I said."

"Mother loves those plates and-"

Arnold lunged for her and caught her throat. "I said shut up," he shouted. They swayed for a second, then both toppled to the floor.

That's the way we found them when we got home.

Ruth was unconscious. Arnold had passed out trying to choke her.

Neither his mother nor I spoke to him when he picked himself up from the floor and shuffled upstairs. We could hear him slamming things into his suitcase. After a while he came down and stood in the doorway and said he was leaving.

He was still our boy. We still loved him and wished we could help him. But we could not say we really wanted him around.

Arnold found his way to Chicago. New Year's Eve, he sat in a cheap dive on South State Street, drinking and listening to the drunks around him talk about their New Year's resolution.

He didn't finish his drink. He told us later that he realized he wasn't any better than those drunks. He thought if he got out in the cold night air and walked, he could figure something out. For the first time in his life, he was scared. He knew he was wanted by the Federal government for desertion, by the state of Michigan for bad checks and by the Philippine government for his army black marketing.

He drifted south on State Street where he saw the sign that read, "JESUS Saves - Pacific Garden Mission." Arnold went inside to sit down.

He told his mother and me later that he sat down in the back row and began to cry. Probably he was looking for a handkerchief when he reached in his back pocket, but whatever, he pulled out some crumpled paper. It was the prayer I had given him the last time I'd seen him in jail.

He read it. "GOD be merciful to me a sinner and save me now. For JESUS' sake." He read it again. "GOD be merciful to me a sinner and save me now. For JESUS' sake." And again.

That was all. Arnold had accepted CHRIST. Right there.

Quietly, by himself. No one had said a word to him about giving up to GOD.

I don't remember what his mother and I said to each other the night Arnold called to tell us the good news. To GOD we said a big, "Thank You."

Yet Arnold was still in trouble. He was a fugitive from three governments. Before he could give himself up the FBI agent traced him to the Pacific Garden Mission. Arnold submitted meekly, was sent to southern Michigan state prison for those bad checks he'd cashed in Grand Rapids for his liquor.

The night before he left for the state penitentiary, I saw him in jail.

He had changed. This time, we prayed together. He had a forgery sentence of two to fourteen years to serve! after that, a charge of army desertion. Still I told him, "GOD will never leave you nor forsake you." I could tell he meant it when he said, "I know it, Dad."

GOD was with Arnold. Even the Michigan warden saw how he had changed. "You're a different man, Vander Meulen. Understand you have had some Bible training," the warden said. "Wonder if you'd like to teach our men's Bible class?"

Taught by Arnold, that class mushroomed from a handful of prisoners to six hundred men.

Then Arnold sat down and wrote the whole story of his black marketing, desertion and his conversion and sent it to the office of the adjutant general of the army.

Honorable discharge in a few weeks came through for him and eligibility to collect some bonus money from the state. That bonus paid off exactly to the penny what he owed for bad checks.

From President Quezon of the Philippines came a letter setting aside all charges against Arnold in that country.

After nineteen months of his fourteen-year term, Arnold was released. Good behavior was the regular thing with him. This time, his mother and I didn't worry about whether he would come home the day he was freed. We knew he would. He did, too.

But not for long. Almost as soon as he was out of jail, Arnold began touring the country.

But not in the way he'd toured it before. This time, it was as an evangelist, telling others over the country the difference between right and wrong, and explaining to them how JESUS CHRIST can make that difference a reality.

~ end of chapter 19 ~
